

## Local Pasts in National Programs

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**I**nterpreting slavery challenges parks to confront the echoes of divisive pasts. Recent ethnographic work highlighted this at Cane River Creole National Historical Park (CARI), a new National Park Service plantation unit in Natchitoches Parish, northwest Louisiana. Plantation parks elsewhere probably face similar challenges, especially when their neighbors include the plantations' white owners and their former tenants. Some tenants, identified partly by French surnames, are called, and call themselves, creoles of color. Others, with surnames described as "American," are called, and call themselves, black people, although youth sometimes prefer "African American." Not only were black people and creoles of color former sharecroppers or laborers, many were born at the plantations and trace their ancestry to slave families.

Each group's perspective on park programs necessarily resonates with their diverse experiences. The park is also, in a sense, "in their face"; that is, it incorporates nearby public and private places, including former residences, gardens and work areas, that local white, black, and creole people had used and culturally defined as theirs. In these circumstances, creating public programs that clearly respect everyone's concerns about their pasts and identities, and the interrelationships the groups have negotiated, assumes exciting but almost formidable dimensions.

Regionally different views on slavery, say between southerners and northerners, introduce more complexities. Still others may reflect scholarly debate, uncertainties about the information park visitors should receive and the techniques for delivering it, difficult choices among competing views of the past, and the reconciliation of disparate views so that local concerns are conveyed while regional and national visitors are effectively served. But it was interest in the community members' perceptions of their own pasts and interpretive suggestions that led the park manager and planners to request a rapid ethnographic survey. Some findings follow, drawn primarily on my work the summers of 1996 and 1997. Dayna Lee and Susan Dollar of Northwestern State University and Allison Pena of Jean Lafitte National Park and Preserve also worked on the 1996 project. In 1997, Allison Pena, Larry Van Horn of the NPS Denver

Service Center, and Sherri Lawson Clark of the Cultural Resources National Program Center in Washington were involved.

Sections of two plantations comprise the park's resource base, the farm buildings and 19th-century brick slave quarters that later housed tenant laborers at Magnolia, and the creole-style big house, farm buildings and quarters that later housed sharecroppers at Oakland. The landscapes and people's earlier distribution on it reflected political, economic, and social traditions so that the "big house" or control center which dominated the landscape was separated physically and symbolically from the tenant areas and outbuildings by gardens and tree-lined avenues. White owners occupied the big house and, until mechanization prompted the final rural exodus in the 1960s, black people lived in the quarters, and black people or creoles of color occupied sharecropper houses. Oakland's last overseers were also creoles of color. Former residents speak of the relatively friendly interactions that might cross class or ethnic lines in the small plantation communities. Even now, chance encounters of plantation and worker families in town or the countryside might still bring greetings and both face and name recognition on the part of the plantation owner.

Plantation owners and former tenants, and other Natchitoches residents shared their insights on interpretive topics, especially slavery. Responses varied somewhat with age, plantation ties, and ethnicity or class. Some creoles of color, white, and black people, without direct ties to the plantation communities, thought no interpretation was possible without discussing slavery as a feudal system, a pragmatic business arrangement for agricultural production, or an inequitable dehumanizing institution. Some people, directly linked to the plantations, thought a combined feudal-market model was acceptable.

Other white and black people, and some creoles of color, closely associated with the park found slavery a nearly tabu subject. Discomfort about the past and distrust about approaches outsiders might take, sometimes coupled with anger and hurt, and the reticence community members expressed signaled the topic's continuing emotional hold. This was true especially, but not only for older people.

Although some black people said “no brutalizing” occurred at the plantations, and one woman from the area spoke proudly about her slave ancestors, others recalled the emotional pain and bitterness that kept their parents and grandparents from speaking of slavery or its immediate aftermath. White people closely associated with the plantation said little about that era, but described the subsequent family struggles to maintain a viable agricultural enterprise despite crop infestations and failures, and financial disasters. Most people, regardless of class or ethnicity, preferred interpretive programs emphasizing “our times,” events of the present century, the times they remembered and often enthusiastically described.

Despite their initial reluctance, people came to agree that slavery was a legitimate interpretive topic, but not as the major or single focus. Slavery was acceptable for public discussion only if presented as one phase in a historical sequence that ran from the plantations’ start through responses to new technologies and transformations from traditional enterprises to the presently mechanized commercial farming operation. Nor should plantation agriculture be the exclusive emphasis. Creole people want their family and community strengths covered. Black people proposed highlighting their own advancement as a community from slavery through tenancy to positions as successful entrepreneurs, professionals, and homeowners. Change had affected white accommodations too so that today’s plantation family members are educators and other professionals, businessmen, and managers.

All people saw their respective religious institutions as linchpins of community and cultural survival. Local people want visitors to understand the dynamic qualities of their lives, and know that rural and urban roles, especially as related to the political economy, have been recreated and renegotiated over the past century. In this sense, NPS is being asked to contextualize past events in terms of political, demographic, economic, etc., conditions. Slavery is not viewed so much as an isolated episode, or statement about morality or the lack of it, or reflections of peoples’ inherent abilities, but rather as one of a series of responses to regional and national conditions. If NPS must speak of slavery, one black person said, “... then get into it and get out,” because the people associated with slavery have moved on too.

Concern also surfaced about managing hurt and anger in public. As one black man noted “... we must talk about the past with compassion because hardships were suffered by everyone, black and white...” and NPS must “...end the story where it comes out now. Even if things may not be

the way everybody wants them, they still progressed to a degree.” Being forced to revisit the pain will be difficult, one black woman observed, but if the NPS is to discuss those days “the lord will show you how to talk about this in a way that doesn’t offend people, but to speak as necessary, not to hurt people or create pain, but to make them understand more.” One benefit black and creole people saw in interpreting plantation history—their history—was documentation and perpetuation of their own past, “preserving the memories of our people from generation to generation.” It seemed particularly attractive as a mechanism for educating youth who might not either know or were in danger of forgetting their peoples’ past struggles.

Still, black people cautioned NPS against trivializing their past, specifically, not to mimic or mock slaves by having people dress as old mamies, speak like they think slaves must have sounded, or act the way they think slaves did. The language of slavery also drew comment with regard to “slave quarters.” Blacks and whites preferred just “quarters” because the houses were occupied successively by different categories of workers. Former tenant laborers asserted the need to “make it clear that we were not slaves.”

The transformation of local plantation society had been ritually crystallized in the celebration of June 19, the day celebrated as freedom day, Emancipation Proclamation Day. Although it was January 1, 1863, when the Emancipation Proclamation actually took effect, June 19 is the day news of it supposedly reached Louisiana. Well into this century black people observed the day as their own, often with the support of plantation owners who provided food—perhaps a steer for barbecuing—and time for family and church celebrations. In this sense, the event marked a redefining of black and white roles and the realignment, not severing, of local relationships. During the past decades, the June 19 celebration had lapsed, replaced partially by the homecomings that reunited dispersed families and the festivities for July 4, which came to be seen as everyone’s Independence Day. Efforts to revive June 19 are evident now, perhaps with new meaning assigned to it. Meanwhile, the old celebrations of June 19 remain, as one elderly woman remarked, a time a person could say “I’m free, I’m free.” Conveying this sentiment and the social, political, and economic realignments it required is the challenge.

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*Muriel (Miki) Crespi is a cultural anthropologist in the NPS National Center for Cultural Resources Stewardship and Partnerships Programs. She is the NPS national coordinator for park ethnography.*